

CHAPTER IX.

We started to time. The baron could not complain this time. After all, I understood his impatience; a minute's delay might cause him to lose the mail boat from Tien Tsin to Japan.

The day looked promising, that is to say, there might have been a wind strong enough to put out the sun as if it were a candle, such a hurricane as sometimes stops the locomotives of the Grand Transasiatic, but to-day it is blowing from the west, and will be supportable, as it blows the train along. We can remain out on the platforms.

I want to enter into conversation with Pan Chao. Popof was right; he must be the son of some family of distinction who has been spending some years in Paris for education and amusement. He ought to be one of the most regular visitors at the Twentieth Century "five o'clocks."

Meanwhile I will attend to other business. There is that man in the case. A whole day will elapse before I can relieve his anxiety. In what a state he must be! But as it would be unwise for me to enter the van during the day, I must wait until night.

I must not forget that an interview with the Caternas is included in the programme. There will be no difficulty in that, apparently.

What will not be so easy is to get into conversation with my No. 12, his superb lordship Faruskiar. He seems rather stiff, does this Oriental.

Ah! There is a name I must know as soon as possible, that of the mandarin returning to China in the form of a mortuary parcel. With a little ingenuity Popof may manage to ascertain it from one of the Persians in charge of his Excellency. If it would only be that of some grand functionary, the Pao-Wang, or the Ko-Wang, or the viceroy of the two Kiangs, the Prince King in person!

For an hour the train is running through the oasis. We shall soon be in the open desert. The soil is formed of alluvial beds extending up to the environs of Merv. I must get accustomed to this monotony of the journey which will last up to the frontier of Turkestan. Oasis and desert, desert and oasis. As we approach the Pamir the scenery will change a little. There are picturesque bits of landscape in that orographic knot which the Russians have had to cut as Alexander cut the gordian knot that was worth something to the Macedonian conqueror of Asia. Here is a good augury for the Russian conquest.

But I must wait for this crossing of the Pamir and its varied scenery. Beyond lay the interminable plains of Chinese Turkestan, the immense sandy desert of Gobi, where the monotony of the journey will begin again.

It is half-past ten. Breakfast will soon be served in the dining car.

Let us take a walk through the length of the train.

Where is Ephrinell? I do not see him at his post by the side of Miss Horatia Bluett, whom I questioned on the subject after saluting her politely.

"Mr. Ephrinell has gone to give an eye to his cases," she replies.

In the rear of the second car Faruskiar and Ghangir have installed themselves; they are alone at this moment, and are talking together in a low tone.

As I return I meet Ephrinell, who is coming back to his traveling companion. He shakes my hand Yankee fashion. I tell him that Miss Horatia Bluett has given me news of him.

"Oh!" says he, "what a woman yonder! What a splendid saleswoman! One of those English--"

"Who are good enough to be Americans!" I add.

"Wait a bit!" he replies, with a significant smile.

As I am going put, I notice that the two Chinamen are already in the dining car, and that Dr. Tio-King's little book is on the table.

I do not consider it too much of a liberty for a reporter to pick up

this little book, to open it and to read the title, which is as follows:

The temperate and regular life,
Or the art of living long in perfect health.

Translated from the Italian of
Louis Cornaro, a Venetian noble.

To which is added the way of correcting a bad constitution,
and enjoying perfect felicity to the most advanced years.
and to die only from the using up of the original humidity
in extreme old age.

Salerno,

1782.

And this is the favorite reading of Dr. Tio-King! And that is why his disrespectful pupil occasionally gives him the nickname of Cornaro!

I have not time to see anything else in this volume than *Abstinencia adjicit vitam*; but this motto of the noble Venetian I have no intention of putting in practice, at least at breakfast time.

There is no change in the order in which we sit down to table. I find myself close to Major Noltitz, who is looking attentively at Faruskiar and his companion, placed at the extremity of the table. We are asking ourselves who this haughty Mongol could be.

"Ah!" said I, laughing at the thought which crossed my mind, "if that is--"

"Who?" asked the major.

"The chief of the brigands, the famous Ki-Tsang."

"Have your joke, Monsieur Bombarnac, but under your breath, I advise you!"

"You see, major, he would then be an interesting personage and worth a long interview!"

We enjoyed our meal as we talked. The breakfast was excellent, the provisions having come freshly on board at Askhabad and Douchak. For drink we had tea, and Crimean wine, and Kazan beer; for meat we had mutton cutlets and excellent preserves; for dessert a melon with pears and grapes of the best quality.

After breakfast I went to smoke my cigar on the platform behind the dining car. Caterna almost immediately joins me. Evidently the estimable comedian has seized the opportunity to enter into conversation with me.

His intelligent eyes, his smooth face, his cheeks accustomed to false whiskers, his lips accustomed to false moustaches, his head accustomed to wigs red, black, or gray, bald or hairy, according to his part, everything denoted the actor made for the life of the boards. But he had such an open, cheery face, such an honest look, so frank an

attitude, that he was evidently a really good fellow.

"Sir," said he to me, "are two Frenchmen going all the way from Baku to Pekin without making each other's acquaintance?"

"Sir," I replied, "when I meet a compatriot--"

"Who is a Parisian--"

"And consequently a Frenchman twice over," I added, "I am only too glad to shake hands with him! And so, Monsieur Caterna--"

"You know my name?"

"As you know mine, I am sure."

"Of course, Monsieur Claudius Bombarnac, correspondent of the Twentieth Century."

"At your service, believe me."

"A thousand thanks, Monsieur Bombarnac, and even ten thousand, as they say in China, whither Madame Caterna and I are bound."

"To appear at Shanghai in the French troupe at the residency as--"

"You know all that, then?"

"A reporter!"

"Quite so."

"I may add, from sundry nautical phrases I have noticed, that you have been to sea."

"I believe you, sir. Formerly coxswain of Admiral de Boissondy's launch on board the Redoubtable."

"Then I beg to ask why you, a sailor, did not go by way of the sea?"

"Ah, there it is, Monsieur Bombarnac. Know that Madame Caterna, who is incontestably the first leading lady of the provinces, and there is not one to beat her as a waiting maid or in a man's part, cannot stand the sea. And when I heard of the Grand Transasiatic, I said to her, 'Be easy, Caroline! Do not worry yourself about the perfidious element. We will cross Russia, Turkestan, and China, without leaving terra firma!' And that pleased her, the little darling, so brave and so devoted, so--I am at a loss for a word--well, a lady who will play the duenna in case of need, rather than leave the manager in a mess! An artiste, a true artiste!"

It was a pleasure to listen to Caterna; he was in steam, as the engineer says, and the only thing to do was to let him blow off. Surprising as it may seem, he adored his wife, and I believe she was

equally fond of him. A well-matched couple, evidently, from what I learned from my comedian, never embarrassed, very wide awake, content with his lot, liking nothing so much as the theater--above all the provincial theater--where he and his wife had played in drama, vaudeville, comedy, operetta, opera comique, opera, spectacle, pantomime, happy in the entertainment which began at five o'clock in the afternoon and ended at one o'clock in the morning, in the grand theaters of the chief cities, in the saloon of the mayor, in the barn of the village, without boots, without patches, without orchestra, sometimes even without spectators--thus saving the return of the money--professionals fit for anything, no matter what.

As a Parisian, Caterna must have been the wag of the forecastle when he was at sea. As clever with his instrument of brass or wood, he possessed a most varied and complete assortment of jokes, songs, monologues, and dialogues. This he told me with an immense amount of attitude and gesture, now here, now there, legs, arms, hands, and feet all going together. I should never feel dull in the company of such a merry companion.

"And where were you before you left France?" I asked.

"At La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, where Madame Caterna achieved a genuine success as Elsa in 'Lohengrin,' which we played without music. But it is an interesting piece, and it was well done."

"You must have been a good deal about the world, Monsieur Caterna?"

"I believe you; Russia, England, both Americas. Ah! Monsieur Claudius."

He already called me Claudius.

"Ah! Monsieur Claudius, there was a time when I was the idol of Buenos Ayres, and the pet of Rio Janeiro! Do not think I would tell you an untruth! No! I know myself. Bad at Paris, I am excellent in the provinces. In Paris you play for yourself; in the provinces you play for the others! And then what a repertory!"

"My compliments, my dear compatriot!"

"I accept them, Monsieur Claudius, for I like my trade. What would you have? All the world cannot expect to be a senator or--a special correspondent."

"There, that is wicked, Monsieur Caterna," said I, with a laugh.

"No; it is the last word."

And while the unwearied actor ran on in this way, stations appeared one after the other between the shrieks of the whistle, Kulka, Nisachurch, Kulla Minor and others, not particularly cheerful to look at; then Bairam Ali at the seven hundred and ninety-fifth verst and Kourlan Kala at the eight hundred and fifteenth.

"And to tell you the truth," continued Caterna, "we have made a little money by going about from town to town. At the bottom of our boxes are a few Northern debentures, of which I think a good deal, and take much care, and they have been honestly got, Monsieur Claudius. Although we live under a democratic government, the rule of equality, the time is still far off when you will see the noble father dining beside the prefect at the table of the judge of appeal, and the actress open the ball with the prefect at the house of the general-in-chief! Well! We can dine and dance among ourselves--"

"And be just as happy, Monsieur Caterna."

"Certainly no less, Monsieur Claudius," replied the future premier comic of Shanghai, shaking an imaginary frill with the graceful ease of one of Louis XV.'s noblemen.

At this point, Madame Caterna came up. She was in every way worthy of her husband, sent into the world to reply to him in life as on the stage, one of those genial theater folks, born one knows not where or how, but thoroughly genuine and good-natured.

"I beg to introduce you to Caroline Caterna," said the actor, in much the same tone as he would have introduced me to Patti or Sarah Bernhardt.

"Having shaken hands with your husband," said I, "I shall be happy to shake hands with you, Madame Caterna."

"There you are, then," said the actress, "and without ceremony, foot to the front, and no prompting."

"As you see, no nonsense about her, and the best of wives--"

"As he is the best of husbands."

"I believe I am, Monsieur Claudius," said the actor, "and why? Because I believe that marriage consists entirely in the precept to which husbands should always conform, and that is, that what the wife likes the husband should eat often."

It will be understood that it was touching to see this honest give-and-take, so different from the dry business style of the two commercials who were in conversation in the adjoining car.

But here is Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer, wearing a traveling cap, coming out of the dining car, where I imagine he has not spent his time consulting the time-table.

"The good man of the hat trick!" said Caterna, after the baron went back into the car without favoring us with a salute.

"He is quite German enough!" said Madame Caterna.

"And to think that Henry Heine called those people sentimental oaks!" I

added.

"Then he could not have known that one!" said Caterna. "Oak, I admit, but sentimental--"

"Do you know why the baron has patronized the Grand Transasiatic?" I asked.

"To eat sauerkraut at Pekin!" said Caterna.

"Not at all. To rival Miss Nelly Bly. He is trying to get around the world in thirty-nine days."

"Thirty-nine days!" exclaimed Gaterna. "You should say a hundred and thirty-nine!"

And in a voice like a husky clarinet the actor struck up the well-known air from the Cloches de Corneville:

"I thrice have been around the world."

Adding, for the baron's benefit:

"He will not do the half."